LIKE TREES
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Psalm 1
Matthew 22:34–40

"They are like trees planted by streams of water."
Psalm 1:4 (NRSV)

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts to your word:
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

One of my favorite memories of my father is of him on his hands and knees in his garden, planting, weeding, trimming. He worked for the railroad, but his real vocation, the work he loved, was gardening: a "Victory Garden" during World War II and later, all his life until he died, a flower garden, not a prize winner, but a source of deep satisfaction and happiness to him if not to me. I was recruited to weed the garden, a task I hated and resisted but one which, years later, I now find strangely satisfying. In fact, a few of the irises in our Garth are from his garden, having traveled with me for forty years and through four gardens in four states. He loved trees: read up on shade and decorative trees, planted two white birches, which never did very well, and a pine tree he planted to mark the birth of my brother, a pine tree whose growth was slow and steady, until it became so large it overwhelmed the entire backyard. He loved Joyce Kilmer's sentimental poem "Trees": made me listen to it and a musical rendition by, I believe, Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians. Waring, a son of Tyrone Pennsylvania, just fifteen miles away, was popular in our home.

> I think that I shall never see
> A poem as lovely as a tree
>
> A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed
> Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
>
> A tree that looks at God all day,
> And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
>
> A tree that may in summer wear
> A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain,
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

Best of all he taught me to look up at trees and marvel at their majesty, taught me to lie on my back and look up into a tree. It's an amazing sight.

I still like to do that whenever the opportunity presents itself—which is not often along Michigan Avenue. But whenever I can, I do. I've graduated from Joyce Kilmer to Wendell Berry, who wrote

Slowly, slowly, they return
To the small woodland let alone:
Great trees, outspreading and upright,
Apostles of the living light.

Patient as stars, they build in air
Tier after tier a timbered choir,
Stout beams upholding weightless grace
Of song, a blessing on this place.

The psalmist wrote

Happy are those . . .
whose delight is in the law of the Lord. . . .
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season

Don't you love that image? — "like trees." I like to think of the wonderful people I have known along the way, whose lives have influenced me, the saints who walked ahead of me and inspired me—I like to think of them as trees, planted by streams of water, yielding fruit.

Happy are those . . .
whose delight is in the law of the Lord. . . .
They are like trees.

There is in that metaphor an important set of assumptions, which go right to the core of our faith tradition. Those assumptions are at least 2,600 years old. The first of them is that there is a moral order in the universe, a moral shape to human life and its interaction and its relationship to the rest of the creation; in theological terms, the creator has a will, an intent, for how things should go in creation and how human life should be lived. It is a

critical point. The creation is not morally neutral. Our lives are not morally neutral. There's a right way to live and a wrong way to live.

And that leads to the second big assumption, namely that right living, living in a way that accords with the moral shape of things, produces happiness. That, too, is a critical affirmation. Goodness equals happiness.

It is one of the great gifts of Judaism—this notion that goodness is related to happiness. It was an important moment centuries later when two Jewish leaders—Jesus, whom we know as the Christ, God's Son, Jesus of Nazareth, and his follower Paul—taught that the whole law, the Torah, is summarized in two commandments: to love God with heart mind and soul and to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

You want to be happy? You want to be one of those lovely productive trees planted by a stream of water? Love God and neighbor. It's the Judeo-Christian answer to life's oldest question, and it is radically different from the answers the world and specifically our culture keep coming up with.

In his book *The Good Life,* Peter Gomes observes, "American culture has produced the richest, most indulged society in history, putting ancient Rome and eighteenth-century France to shame." But, Gomes says, "the Midas culture has not produced the happiness or joy that it appeared to have promised. . . . In the land whose Constitution guarantees the pursuit of happiness, we seem terribly unhappy." Gomes is the minister at Harvard's Memorial Church and professor of ethics and it is his experience that young people want a lot more than the affluent, commodified Midas culture has given them. "They don't want their father's Oldsmobile," he says. "They want and deserve something better: they want a good life, true happiness, and a chance to do something better. They want to offer their lives for something worthy of sacrifice and service, and they want to live so as to leave the world a better place."

There is a word here for the church. Joanna and I and a small group of Fourth Church staff and officers just returned from the annual General Assembly meeting of our church, which this year was held in Denver. And we have experienced again how much of the church's energy and resources are consumed by infighting over issues of doctrinal precision and internal rules about who can be ordained and who will not be ordained, an issue that has been referred to a special committee on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church but an issue that simply will not go away until we become a more welcome, hospitable, and inclusive church than we are at the moment. One of the highlights of the Assembly, in addition to the election of Susan Andrews as Moderator—Susan is a good friend, a member of the board of the Covenant Network, and a strong advocate for a more open, generous, and inclusive church than we are at the moment—the next best thing was

an address by former Senator Paul Simon. His topic was poverty, world hunger, what we as a nation and as churches are doing—or more accurately, not doing—about it. He pointed out that of the twenty-two wealthiest industrial nations in world, the U.S.A. is first in wealth and twenty-second—dead last—in terms of aid to combat hunger and poverty. And he challenged the church. “No one reads the Presbyterian Book of Confessions and Book of Order and decides to become a Presbyterian.” People are attracted to Christianity, he said, “because of the quality of the life the church lives, the compassion and generosity and love shown to the world.”

That has been the experience of this church for all of its history. Sitting here on this corner since 1914, this church was built for service. And down through the years it has understood its existence in terms of the love and compassion and generosity shown to its neighbors. We have experienced the ancient truth that goodness and generosity and love become a compelling witness to the truth of the gospel—much more compelling than theological precision, our creeds and sermons and worship services—and that it is delightful and joyful and satisfying and productive to convey the meaning of our faith in acts of kindness and love.

It’s a wonderful story, and it continues in our generation. As part of our Tutoring Program, twenty-five high school students just completed Job Training and Readiness class, and all twenty-five have summer internship jobs identified and organized by our Board of Deacons. And just last Friday, 250 children from the Near North Magnet School Cluster Program, a part of our outreach to the children of Cabrini-Green and the four elementary schools that serve them, participated in a musical, “Tales of the Drum.” It was a wonderful success: singing and dancing and drumming. Hundreds of classmates and parents and families enjoyed the show. There is also a nice footnote. The week before the performance, all the students’ costumes were stolen from the dance instructor’s car, and Fourth Presbyterian Church dipped into its Mission reserves and bought new costumes just in time for the show to go on.

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If this Fourth Presbyterian Church has learned anything over the years, it is the evangelical power of its mission. Our strength, our continuing growth at a time when not many mainline churches are growing, is a direct result, I firmly believe, of our commitment to mission, to using our resources to serve those God has given us to serve.

And immediately after the 11 a.m. service today, we will officially launch a new mission adventure that promises to provide continuing energy and love and service for the future. I like to think of it as a kind of tree planting for us. We will dedicate a piece of property on Chicago Avenue today. It is on the edge of Cabrini-Green, and as that neighborhood evolves in the days ahead, it will be the site of a wonderful building to be a bridge, a meeting place, and a community center for new neighbors living in a new community. That new community promises to be unique: a carefully planned blending of private, subsidized, and public housing, and we will be there, in the middle of it, in the name of Jesus Christ and his law of love and kindness and hospitality and grace. We may even put a garden on the property until we can build a building, and who knows, we may even plant a tree or two. But that property represents today something unique and powerful about Fourth Presbyterian Church but also something compellingly true about our Judeo-Christian faith tradition: namely that it is good and delightful to live out God's generous love for all people. And it is the most eloquent expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ I can think of. The good news about God's love is Jesus Christ, the one who said of all the law and prophets, all of God's intent for the creation, God's true law is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

"Happy are those whose delight is in the law of the Lord." There is a downside. There are those who choose not to delight in the law of the Lord. The psalmist calls them the wicked. They are not like trees. They are like chaff that the wind blows away. The wicked here are not terrible, evil people. They are the indifferent, the ones who choose not to care, not to love, not to give themselves for the sake of the neighbor in need and the health and welfare of the community. They live small lives, hemmed in by the perimeters of their own needs and desires.

Happy are those who do care deeply and love passionately and give generously. They are like trees.

There is something hopeful about planting a tree. The pine tree my father planted lived past his death and into a new generation, and who knows how many other trees were planted as a result of its fertile pine cones and seeds blown by the wind and deposited in the ground. Professor Joseph Sittler, one of the profoundly influential Christian thinkers of our time, taught for years at the University of Chicago and after retirement at the Lutheran School of Theology down in Hyde Park. And among the Sittler stories still being told is how he used to purchase small seedlings and go around the campus in the springtime planting them. Sittler was a consummate realist with a finely honed sense of sin, or what he called "human cussedness." But he was always hopeful in God's providence and love, a hope symbolized by the great theologian, in his seventies, nearly blind, down on his knees, planting a tree.

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What this church is doing today on Chicago Avenue, what it continues to do in its mission and ministry, are symbols of hope, of our confidence in God's future, no matter how ambiguous and challenging the present may be. And you are invited to live your life like that too, to invest your love and compassion and your hope in the firm foundation of this ancient promise.

The late E. B. White wrote an essay about his wife, Catherine, who preceded him in death. She was a gardener too, every year planning her garden, ordering seeds and bulbs from the catalogs, designing the garden and planting. When she became ill, she continued. White wrote:

> Armed with a diagram and clipboard, Catherine would get into a shabby old raincoat, much too long for her, and put on a little round wool hat, and proceed to the director's chair placed at the edge of the plot. There she would sit, hour after hour, with the wind and the weather, while Henry Allen produced dozens of paper packages of new bulbs and a basket full of old ones, ready for the intricate interment. There was something comical, yet touching, in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion. The small, hunched-over figure; her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be another spring; oblivious to the end of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand; sitting there with her chart under those dark skies in the dying October calmly plotting the resurrection. (*A Biography,* p.353)
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Amen.